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AN EXCERPT FROM A NOVEL IN PROGRESS*T. Christian*

I do not remember the first time that I saw him. Nor do I remember what I was thinking at the time. I do know that it was at St. Peter's.

I was always in Vatican City it seemed. Whether sightseeing, mailing letters, or just getting away from campus, St. Peter's was an escape for me. Walking alone, in need of some place to visit, to be apart, to think, this, for me, St. Peter's provided. An old saying has it that all roads lead to Rome, and within roam, all roads lead to St. Peter's Square. I guess that there is some truth to that. Here beat the heart of Rome, for me, and for the world as well, speaking through the blessing of one man.

Day after day, from early dawn to the hour when shadows lengthen and the buildings and the statues slowly blend into a uniform gray, Piazza San Pietro is like a stage for all of the world. The Square is as a theater, both human and holy, speaking in all languages, and with many unique modes of expression. The performers are the visitors, revealing heartfelt astonishment and agreement. And the natives of Rome, clearly distinguishable from the cosmopolitan character of the square, take part here with the prosaicness of a child. The natives of the Square certainly include the doves, the street vendors, the splashing fountains and Bernini's colonnade.

In every season - even during autumn, under a sky of red-yellow, as it was - the Square is alive in a way encountered nowhere else. Yes, I am sure that it was here that I first saw him.

I had read in a travel guide that vesper mass was celebrated every evening at five o'clock. I had taken the bus downtown from campus and arrived at St. Peter's about ten minutes before five. The basilica was filled as every other day - tourists and clergy, believers - Catholic and non-Catholic, from all over the world. A meeting place for Christianity, amidst the statues and the rows of columns walked welcomed strangers.

I began slowly down the long center aisle and found myself a place beside an elderly priest, who sat quietly saying the rosary. Only a few pews in the front of the high altar were occupied and I wondered if perhaps the mass was no longer held. The rest of the pews slowly began to fill though; in front of me sat two middle-aged women, clinging to their guidebooks - reading then pointing, reading then pointing. So much marble and gold. And history and faith; knowledge and tradition; church history and history of the world. So many superficial impressions of perfect work missed.

Just before five o'clock, he walked up the center aisle, stopped, turned as though looking for a seat, and sat down somewhere in the front.

At the stroke of five, a loud chord filled the basilica. Everyone arose

from their seats and turned to the back of St. Peter's as the processional began. Dressed in green, purple, red, and of course, black, clergy members of many ages strode in with all seriousness - the younger smiling.

At communion, I approached the high altar to receive the body of Christ, my hands cupped before me. The bishop held the Eucharist, waiting for me to accept it in the more traditional manner. I crossed myself and returned to my seat. A beautiful Latin hymn sung by the choir of clerics filled the entire basilica. The mass ended and I took a few photographs inside St. Peter's. The interior is different from anything anyone can imagine on the basis of countless pictures alone, though. Then, one visit demands another, then another, then another, and yet another. This I learned.

On my way out, I knelt down to snap a full shot of St. Peter's by night. As I focused, I noticed him through my camera viewfinder, descending the steps in front of me. I fumbled for a moment and removed the camera from my eye.

"Pas moi?" a man beside him said.

"No," I laughed, and took the photo.

It didn't turn out.

It wasn't until one day - it was a dreary day - that I saw him again. The rain fell as I made my way under the arch, pass the Swiss guards and down the cobblestone streets of Vatican City. Class had let out early that day and I was en route to the Vatican Photo Service with plans to order prints from the Papal audience I had attended two days prior. Resembling an old apartment building, I entered the dark foyer, unsure if I had found the place I was seeking. An arrow, though, posted on the wall, directed me to the second floor. Others were waiting - it was not yet three thirty, still siesta. The hall was short and quite narrow. As I waited, I unzipped my jacket and shook the rain from my umbrella. I had found myself a place against the wall and stood glancing at the others who stood quietly waiting - checking their watches periodically. It was then that I noticed him there, just a few feet away - closer to the door of the photo service. He didn't see me, but then he did.

Aware of his gaze I began fidgeting with something in my knapsack, always looking the other way as not to embarrass him. Slowly he walked toward the place where I stood and leaned against the stair railing directly across from me. He watched me. I would check my watch and he would check his. I giving him a look of restlessness, he would chuckle and do the same. Remembering St. Peter's and the man beside him who spoke French, I looked up and asked offhandedly, "Quelle heure est-il?"